

# Cumulative jeopardy? A response to Brown and Ward

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**Cumulative jeopardy? A response to Brown and Ward.**

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**Cumulative jeopardy? A response to Brown and Ward.****Paul Bywaters****Corresponding Author: Tel.: 044 1926 882595****E-mail address: P.Bywaters@coventry.ac.uk****Centre for Community and Social Justice, Coventry University, Priory Street, Coventry CV1 5FB.****044 2476 887688****Abstract**

In recent years, the political context of children's social care in England has shifted from doubts about the efficacy of out-of-home care to the view that more children should be separated from their birth parents, earlier and more speedily. Brown and Ward's (2014) article 'Cumulative jeopardy' reflects this transition, making the case that there is a 'gross mismatch between timeframes for early childhood development and professional responses to evidence of abuse and neglect in the early years' (p.6). This analysis of the research on which their argument is based, 'Infants suffering, or likely to suffer, significant harm', raises questions about whether the evidence presented adequately supports the conclusions drawn. Four aspects of the study are addressed: methodological, empirical, conceptual and ethical. It is argued that it is premature to reach a judgement about the balance of evidence for more widespread and early separation of infants from birth parents on the basis of the study.

**Keywords**

Child protection, very young children, decision making, children's rights, family support

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## Cumulative jeopardy? A response to Brown and Ward.

### 1. Introduction

In recent years a succession of publications and speeches from both academics and politicians in England have made the argument that ‘we should be looking to provide public care for more children rather than fewer...by providing care at an earlier stage for many’ (Forrester et al., 2009, p. 452). Forrester et al.’s article was a direct attempt to rebut what they perceived as the dominant political assumption of the time, expressed by the then Secretary of State for Education, Alan Johnson, that ‘it is inexcusable and shameful that the care system seems all too often to reinforce ... early disadvantage, rather than helping children to successfully overcome it’ (op. cit. p. 440). The claim made was that the care system, although not the experience of children on leaving care, was broadly positive for many children and the apparent failings of out-of-home care were more likely the result of delayed decisions to intervene and remove children, than quality of care offered to children once separated from their parents.

This prescription – more children to be separated from birth parents, removed earlier and more speedily – has now become the dominant policy imperative in England, with Johnson’s successor, Michael Gove (2012) claiming that ‘our society has put the interests of adults before the needs of children....Too many children are left for far too long in homes where they are exposed to appalling neglect and criminal mistreatment.’ The 2013 Review of Social Work Education in England which Gove commissioned from Martin Narey, previously Chief Executive of the children’s charity Barnardo’s, broadened out the argument to a general attack on the definition of social work internationally and on what he perceived to be the political bias of educators. ‘(W)e need a definition that concentrates on that work, generally carried out in the statutory sector, which is about protecting children’ (Narey, 2013, p.13). Narey asserted that social workers were being taught to ignore the needs of children while seeing parents only as victims of social inequality. Educators were accused of ‘seek(ing) to persuade students that poor parenting or neglect are necessary consequences of disadvantage. There may be a partial correlation between disadvantage and poor parenting but there is not a causal link’ (p.11).

Further support for the case for removing more children and more speedily is provided in Rebecca Brown and Harriet Ward’s (2014) latest publication on their study ‘Infants suffering, or likely to suffer, significant harm’. This is a longitudinal study of babies who were the subject of a formal child protection enquiry, that is to say a core assessment or a Section 47 assessment, before their first birthday (see also Ward, Brown and Westlake 2012; Ward, Brown and Maskell-Graham, 2012). The authors make serious charges about the quality of decision making by children’s services staff and their agencies. The central allegation is expressed in this paragraph:

There is little doubt that there is a gross mismatch between timeframes for early childhood development and professional responses to evidence of abuse and neglect in the early years. Delays in taking appropriate and effective action mean that many children are left in very damaging home circumstances or placed in limbo for lengthy periods. Such experiences can have a negative impact on the ways in which they negotiate key developmental tasks and compromise their future life chances across the whole spectrum of development. Brown and Ward, 2014, p.6)

The authors, like Gove and Narey, argue that too little attention is paid by social workers to the needs of children and too much to the rights of parents, with social work education being identified as a key problem. But are these claims and the underlying case for speedier and more widespread separation of children from birth parents supported by the evidence offered? There are four significant reasons for doubt: methodological, empirical, conceptual and ethical.

None of the following is intended to imply that some children are not in need of protection, that decisions are always made in a timely fashion or that resolving any of the issues involved, including those of research methodology, is straightforward. It is intended to suggest that a rush to judgement on the basis of the evidence to date is, at best, premature. This review is based on the two accounts of the research given in Brown and Ward (2014) and Ward, Brown & Westlake (2012).

## 2. Methodology

In Brown and Ward's influential review of research (2013, p.12) the authors, discussing the difficulties faced by researchers wishing to access 'vulnerable subjects', state that 'sample sizes are often small, and sometimes skewed' and reference the 2012 account of their research (Ward, Brown and Westlake, 2012). However, readers of the 2014 article alone may not be aware of some of the difficulties experienced by the research team in securing the sample of children on whom their study is based. In the 2012 account, these difficulties are discussed in greater detail. Families were recruited through 10 large local authorities (LAs) in England, not including any in inner or outer London, with over a half of all cases coming from two metropolitan LAs and one county. The research team used an opt-in approach to securing parental consent to participating in the study requiring that parents return a written reply slip indicating their interest. Eighty four families returned reply slips and that this was 'around 4%' of all eligible families in the 10 participating LAs (Ward et al., 2012, p.215), suggesting that about 2100 families were eligible for inclusion. Of these 84 families, around two thirds were eventually enrolled in the study, although it is unclear for how many the full data set of interviews and case records was eventually completed. Therefore, the 57 families (it is unclear at times whether the 57 refer to 'families', 'cases, or 'children') who were involved at the outset of the study would constitute about 2.7% of all eligible children. By the children's second birthday researchers were in contact with primary carers of only 35 children, just 1.67% of the eligible population. How many of the 10 LAs were still participating in the reduced sample is not reported.

Quite properly, the authors draw attention to this potential for bias in their own sample in both Ward, Brown & Westlake (2012) and Brown and Ward (2014), making it clear that the children they studied were not representative of the eligible population in several significant respects. They make this judgement on the basis of comparisons with official data collected on all eligible children in 4 of the 10 LAs, some 693 children. Even though the sample size is small (and the original intention was to include 100 children), the sample children were statistically significantly more likely to have been referred before birth and to have had a period in out-of-home care before the age of 1. Very few 'no further action' decisions were made on the sample children – just 3 cases (5.3%) compared to 54% of eligible children. The cases where parents did agree to participate were those who 'the interview data suggests ... were more likely to be parents with very positive or very negative perceptions of children's social care' (Ward, Brown and Westlake, 2012, p.220). One reason for this might be that 'at least 20 mothers and an unknown number of fathers had already experienced the permanent

removal of older children' (p.60), which must be another factor distinguishing this sample from the eligible population. And as the authors comment, 'losing a child to adoption or special guardianship also had a major, ongoing impact on parents' subsequent functioning, for it had left them with an enduring sense of shame and loss' (p.60). It is interesting that Wilkinson and Pickett (2009) in 'The Spirit Level: Why unequal societies always do better' identify shame as a manifestation of how inequality within a society gets under the skin of individuals, part of the social and emotional accompaniments of relative material disadvantage (Featherstone, White and Morris, 2014).

What is not included, presumably because the official data set used for comparison does not collect the information, are details about the nature and circumstances of the families involved. The comparator data does not include family size, parental age, the presence or absence of two parents, parental employment and financial circumstances, their accommodation or the environments in which they lived. As the authors say, 'The study sample is therefore skewed towards infants who are at a higher risk of experiencing abuse and neglect than the eligible population' (p.2), but it is also skewed towards families who have had negative prior experiences of children's services' interventions and may, or may not, be skewed towards parents who are living in particularly difficult circumstances.

The point of this critique is not to denigrate the research team's efforts. It is clear that they adopted a careful and ethical approach to a difficult task. The point is rather to ask how readers should assess the results and take these limitations into account in judging the conclusions drawn. Of course, this is difficult because we do not fully know how the families compare with the whole eligible population. Not only does this study not provide that data comprehensively but no other systematic, representative study of the circumstances of children on child protection measures has ever been undertaken in England which we could adopt as background, and the last such study of looked after children (in out-of-home care) was published in 1989 (Bebbington and Miles). This should make the authors cautious about drawing general conclusions from a small and unrepresentative sample. Indeed in Ward, Brown and Westlake (2012, p.203), they describe the findings as 'exploratory'. Instead we are told three times that there is '*little doubt*' not only that there is a '*gross*' problem in the timeliness of decision making but that this results in '*many* children (being) left in very damaging home circumstances' (my italics). It is not clear how the conclusions are tempered by the sampling problems identified. Of course, one child left in avoidably damaging circumstances where there are good available alternatives is one too many, but that is not what is being argued.

### 3. Empirical

A second concern about the study reported by Brown and Ward, involves their analysis of risk factors. Much attention has been paid in recent years to the role of three key factors which correlate with raised rates of child maltreatment: parental substance misuse, mental ill-health and intimate partner violence, although I and others have argued that these are too often treated simplistically (Bywaters, 2013; Featherstone, White and Morris, 2014). These factors are the focus of close attention over five and a half pages in the extended account of the research, with further pages describing some parents' learning difficulties and the previous removal of other children (Ward et al., 2012). (Nothing is reported about the parents' physical health or impairments.) These factors also feature in the list in the 'Cumulative Jeopardy' article, on the basis of which families in the study were sorted into four risk categories. The full list of factors, drawn from Hindley et al. (2006), is

‘parental substance misuse, paranoid psychosis or personality disorder, inter-parental conflict and violence, parental abuse in childhood and denial of problems’. The Hindley study was unusual in not identifying relative poverty or other measures of material disadvantage or inequality as a key risk factor for maltreatment (Bebbington and Miles, 1989; Oliver et al., 2001; Dickens et al., 2005; Sidebotham and Heron, 2006; Slack et al., 2011; Thoburn et al., 2013; Wulczyn et al., 2013; Eckenrode et al., 2014; Bywaters et al., 2014) but did caution (p.751) against applying ‘the findings directly to the United Kingdom and other jurisdictions where different services and definitions may prevail. Large differences in demographic factors such as levels of poverty are also important to consider when extrapolating the findings to other settings.’

In contrast to this focus on certain characteristics of the parents, only a single page is devoted to the material conditions in which they lived and environmental obstacles which they faced. Poverty is reported to be ‘endemic’ for the families concerned and the communities in which they lived but this is not treated as a risk factor. If data was systematically collected about families’ financial circumstances, it is not reported, with only seven lines in Ward et al. (2012) devoted to it. A slightly longer account is given of the housing problems faced, with homelessness, precarious accommodation or very poor quality housing affecting over a third of the families. It is unclear whether this was the situation at the point of recruitment to the study or throughout the five years being reported on, but elsewhere we are told that many of the families moved in and out of temporary accommodation during the study. There is little or no indication of the wider environmental context in which parents were bringing up their children, for example, of the neighbourhoods in which they lived, the availability of local services and facilities, transport systems, parks and green spaces. This combination – a reference to families’ disadvantaged material circumstances without detailed analysis or follow up – is not uncommon in UK research studies of child welfare, as I have argued previously (Bywaters 2013). This is partly because no such data is routinely required to be collected and reported to nationally about the family circumstances of those in contact with children’s services.

While Brown and Ward (2014) do briefly recognise the relevance of the material circumstances of the families, it is only in the final paragraph in which they are described as ‘wider societal issues’. The heading in Ward, Brown and Westlake (2012) for discussing finances and housing is similarly revealing: they are described as ‘risk factors in the wider environment’. I doubt whether many people think of our income or accommodation in this way, even if we are not in acute debt or homeless, troubled by neighbours or in over-crowded, depressing and insecure housing as many of these families were (Ward, Brown and Westlake, 2012). This seems to me to reflect a wider failure of child welfare professionals to take sufficiently seriously the impact of what in studies of health inequity are called ‘social determinants’ on mothers’ and fathers’ capacity to parent effectively. It also reflects a failure to examine the interaction between the structural issue of unequal material resources and substance use, mental ill-health and intimate partner violence (Bywaters, 2013). And it is part of the neo-liberal shift of attention from meeting collective need to lessening individual risk (Culpitt, 1999).

#### **4. Conceptual**

Central to the Cumulative Jeopardy paper is this idea (p.1):

It is therefore imperative that professionals with responsibilities for safeguarding children make and implement effective and timely decisions both to identify those likely to suffer significant harm and to take action to prevent its occurrence (or recurrence).

This sounds eminently reasonable and indeed it is. But the remainder of the article (and previous reports based on this study) appears to confuse the issue of effective decision making with a presumption that decisions should be made to separate children from their birth parents. Throughout the reporting of the findings, the case is being made that if only a decision had been made to remove a child earlier and place him or her in a permanent alternative family, then less damage would have occurred. This is presented as a divide between making a decision and failing to do so. This raises questions about how the concept of the 'decision' is characterised as it looks as though the authors' tendency is to recognise a 'decision' only when it is a decision to separate. When it is a judgement to keep a family together, it is characterised as 'indecisive'. But it is possible that these are decisive judgements, decisions to support a family to stay together in the best interests of the child or because sufficient evidence for legal removal does not exist.

... indecisive actions and delays in professional decision-making can be identified at every stage of the child welfare process in England. Infants in the prospective cohort study of significant harm were all recruited on the basis that they had been identified at a very early stage; nevertheless there were extensive delays in deciding whether their parents had sufficient capacity to provide nurturing homes, in making viable permanence plans and in ensuring that they were adequately safeguarded through legal processes. (p.5)

There is little doubt that the child welfare system in England responds too slowly and too indecisively ... (p.7)

The research evidence indicates that a number of children are left so long in abusive situations that the chances of them achieving permanence through adoption or other forms of substitute care are diminished.... Decisions concerning separation therefore need to be made much earlier (p.7).

Here social workers', services' and court actions are not presented as decisions between alternative strategies for managing cases but as delays in reaching the decision for separation. The consequence of this presumption is that the reader is not given evidence about the nature and content of decisions that were taken *not* to remove children. So, for example, first, the reader is not told whether there was sufficient evidence to separate children from parents involuntarily at an earlier stage in their lives. It is one thing to assert (with hindsight) that children had been subject to maltreatment or neglect for a period before eventual separation, quite another to provide evidence that an earlier decision to separate could have been carried through with the agreement of parents or by a court judgement against their wishes. An indication of the complexity of such assessments is given by the authors in Ward, Brown and Westlake's account of abandoning the use of a research tool for assessment of children's home circumstances. The IT-HOME inventory for the 'Measurement of the Environment for Infants and Toddlers' (Caldwell and Bradley, 2003) 'did not prove a reliable means of distinguishing between satisfactory and unsatisfactory homes' (Ward, Brown and Westlake, 2012, p. 32) because it produced what the researchers viewed as false negatives. Only one infant out of 27 assessed using this process met the criteria for judging the home conditions as 'suspect'. The research team is probably correct in judging this method to have underestimated or



failed to identify risk, but the research problems in applying this tool indicate the difficulties in reaching reliable judgements.

Second, the reader is told little about what support and what services were offered to families. I assume that the decisions made during these children's early years were not just whether or not to separate them from their parents but about the options of alternative packages of services, one of which would be temporary or permanent placement with different carers if that were necessary and possible. We read little or nothing about the nature or content of such packages, their adequacy for meeting the needs of the child and parents, whether some kinds of supportive interventions were more effective than others, whether the support packages and specialist services agreed in case conferences were carried out and adequately resourced or how they affected parents and children. The potential value of such information is underlined by the authors' evidence (Brown and Ward, 2012, p. 3) that 2 children considered high risk at identification and 13 children considered medium risk who remained at home were judged as low risk at 3, and 13 children apparently remained low risk at 5. (There are some inconsistencies between Tables 1 and 2, making it unclear whether there were 16 or 19 children who were low risk at age 3. If it was 16, the percentage who were low risk should be 37% of the 43 children as stated in the text, not 26% as in Table 1. If it was 19, the percentage would have been 44%.) It would be valuable to know the circumstances of these families (at least 50% of all the children who were not already separated at the time of initial identification) and to know in detail what factors had enabled these parents to improve their family situation, including those elements of support provided by targeted and universal services.

The authors gave some attention to these issues in an earlier description of the study but the evidence is unsystematic (Ward, Brown and Westlake, 2012). Relatively few pages of Ward, Brown and Westlake (2012, pp. 99-102, 120, 207-08) are devoted to this group who are said mainly to comprise those who either overcame problems such as poor mental health or addiction, or who had separated from a partner. Virtually no details are given about *how* these high risk situations had successfully turned round, whether they could have been predicted, or why in some low risk cases at age three there was subsequent deterioration by the age of five<sup>1</sup>. For example, we are told that 'there is some evidence that parents whose infants were removed after lengthy delays received the most intensive packages of services' (p.165), but we are not told what those packages were or how well resourced and sustained. We are told that 'social care involvement was also often of very short duration' (p.165), that social workers were 'occasionally under pressure to close cases prematurely because of a shortage of resources' (p.166) and that parents complained that 'support could be withdrawn or reduced before they were ready or able to cope without it' (p.166). We gather that parents 'particularly appreciated' help from other 'adult' services with drug and alcohol addiction but that only 5 out of 17 families in which substance use was a risk factor mentioned receiving specialist services. There is no record of how many were offered such services and, if not, why not. We are also told that parents 'most valued' '... practical help ...with funding for nursery places ...finance for furnishing homes and baby equipment; and help with applying for benefits and housing' (p.197), echoing Thoburn et al. (2012), in other words with those issues which the authors characterised as 'the wider environment'. But again there is no systematic reporting of how many families received such help, and to what extent it met their needs.

The issue of decision making is presented as one in which child welfare professionals and their agencies simply acted too slowly in a situation of relative certainty about the damage being done to

children. But it could have focused attention on the effectiveness – or otherwise – of the particular combinations of help which families were offered, whether they were sufficiently well targeted to families' needs, whether they were well delivered, and whether they were sufficiently resourced.

Notwithstanding the limited attention given to reporting these issues, the authors' own data shows that at the end of three years, of the 32 children not already separated from their parents when identified for the study, either 16 or 19 were living at home and considered 'safeguarded'. It is unclear whether the authors are advocating that these children should also have had early decisions for permanent alternative placements and whether they are able to determine in advance which children will be safeguarded if they remain at home and with what packages of support. If they cannot, it is unclear whether they are advocating the removal of such children as 'collateral damage', a necessary consequence of an approach which highlights risk and advocates removal.

## 5. Ethics

The ethical framework within which decisions to sustain or separate families are made is seen by Brown and Ward (p.6) to be one of the causes of excessive delay, echoing Gove and Narey (op. cit.).

The legislation reflects a principle, also embodied in the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child, that 'children are generally best looked after within the family' (Department of Health et al., 2000, p.1). Given that preservation of the family is one of their fundamental guiding principles, it is particularly difficult for decision-makers to identify those children whose needs manifestly cannot be met within it. To do so is to go against the grain of professional culture and expectation.

Brown and Ward see human rights legislation and principles being used in an imbalanced way to favour parents' rights over children's rights. The supporting evidence they cite (p.6) is from publications in 2008, before the impact of the global financial crisis and the Peter Connolly case. Since 2007/8 (and the recruitment of Brown and Ward's sample) the annual total of Section 47 enquiries undertaken in England has risen from 76,800 to 142,500, the number of initial child protection conferences from 40,300 to 65,200 and of new child protection plans (CPP) from 34,400 to 48,300 (DCSF, 2008; Department for Education, 2014). These very large increases of 86%, 62% and 40%, respectively, suggest that many more children are being drawn into the safeguarding net but of those investigated an increasingly small proportion are judged to require a statutory intervention. It is uncertain whether this increase in investigations means that children as a whole are safer or their wellbeing enhanced (Spratt et al., 2014). On the one hand an increased number of children are subject to a CPP (assuming that CPPs are effective), but consideration also has to be given to the impact on families of investigations which do not result in a CPP, the opportunities lost when social workers have to prioritise investigations over support work with children and parents and the consequences of resources being transferred from other services to meet the demand for assessment (Association of Directors of Children's Services, 2012). In 2007/8 42,400 families were the subjects of Section 47 enquiries without a CPP resulting, by 2013/14 this had increased to 94,200 families.

What are the consequences of this epidemic of investigations? If the result were that a larger number of families with unsubstantiated child protection allegations received alternative forms of family support, this might be a positive outcome. However, in practice this is not likely to have been

occurring. The increase in investigations is taking place against a background of both raised numbers and rates of children in out-of-home care (32% more children starting a period of out-of-home care in 20013/14 than 2008/9) and constrained overall expenditure on children's social care including early years support services (ADCS, 2012) – projected to be down 26% in England between 2009/10 and 2011/12 (Chartered Institute of Public Finance and Accountancy, 2011). Increased numbers of investigations and care placements inevitably squeeze both universal and targeted support services for children and parents rather than providing enhanced access to them. How should this extraordinary increase in investigation rates be taken into account in interpreting Brown and Ward's data and conclusions?

The authors argue that children's rights to a family life should be seen as a right to an alternative family, if necessary. However, they characterise the issue in terms of a balance between children's rights and parents' rights, with little attention given to the third party with responsibilities: the state. While a child's right to a family is an important ethical context for child protection policy and practice, three other internationally recognised rights are also important, rights which impose obligations on states as well as individuals. The first, in the United Nations Declaration of Human Rights (UNDHR), Article 25, 1, underpins the provision of social services to children and their families: 'Everyone has the right to a standard of living adequate for the health and wellbeing of himself and of his family, including food, clothing, housing and medical care and necessary social services, and the right to security in the event of unemployment, sickness, disability, widowhood, old age or other lack of livelihood in circumstances beyond his control.' There are many essential elements of wellbeing which can only be assured through the actions of states and legal systems. States have responsibilities for securing these fundamental conditions. The second is the principle of equal rights: 'All human beings are born free and equal in dignity and rights.' (Article 1) and 'Everyone is entitled to all the rights and freedoms set forth in this Declaration, without distinction of any kind....' (Article 2). Again, the role of the state is crucial in securing this right. Third, Article 5 of the CRC says that 'States Parties shall respect the responsibilities, rights and duties of parents or, where applicable, the members of the extended family or community as provided for by local custom, legal guardians or other persons legally responsible for the child, to provide, in a manner consistent with the evolving capacities of the child, appropriate direction and guidance in the exercise by the child of the rights recognized in the present Convention'. It is not acceptable – and Brown and Ward do not advocate – for a child to be separated from her or his birth parents and transferred to another just because that child's long term prospects might be better. Adoption or permanent placement is not a question of a choice between two families, a comparison of opportunities. As recent court judgements in the UK have underlined, adoption is 'a very extreme thing' and 'the last resort' (National Adoption Leadership Board, 2014, no page numbers). A forced alternative placement can only be a consideration if the birth family is judged not to be capable of providing good enough care (or unwilling to do so), even with 'adequate' support. That is the background to the Australian government's recent apology to mothers who had been subject to forced adoption (Gillard, 2013). Given the weight of current political support for adoption in England with considerable consequences for the numbers of children adopted annually (up 58% between 2007/8 and 2013/14), is it still true that 'culture and expectation' favour birth families to the extent that Brown and Ward suggest?

## Conclusion

Longitudinal population studies are rare in social work research and the authors are to be commended for attempting such a project. The multi-method design, incorporating the voices of parents and workers, is highly appropriate for examining the complex issues they are concerned to address about the care of children who come to the attention of child welfare services.

What this response is questioning is not so much the fundamental concerns or general methods employed, but whether all the appropriate evidence was collected and taken into account and whether the conclusions drawn now are adequately supported by the evidence presented. The authors call to 'Get(...) the right balance between avoiding a rush to judgement and making timely decisions' (p.7) applies to policy making as well as casework. It is not clear what conclusions can be drawn in 2014 from the small and unrepresentative sample of cases (1.57% of eligible children by year 3) that the authors recruited in 2006-7. The absence of systematic information, first about the circumstances of the families and, second, about the support offered to parents undermines the effectiveness of the case being made for the earlier removal of children in this sample and for wider policy making to be based upon the evidence of this study (even when supplemented by a literature review). The changed economic, political, policy, legal and practice context since the study was initiated requires consideration. But the authors' belief in the value of more widespread early removal of babies and their characterisation of the problem as one of learned indecisiveness by social workers, their agencies and the courts means that there is little discussion of alternative accounts in this article.

The primary alternative account would be one which focuses less attention on parental and professional failure and the opposition of children's and parents' rights and more on how to maximise children's wellbeing, individually and at the population level. As Spratt et al. (2014) identify, societal changes and the effects of structural inequalities are central threats to such wellbeing, alongside instances of parental abuse. For the vast majority of children who come to the attention of children's services separation will not ever be the solution of choice and calls for relational approaches to work in child protection (for example, Lonne, Harries and Lantz, 2013) are built on that recognition: the importance of the state building a positive relationship with families, of the state being seen as supportive and valued by parents, not primarily as an investigative force to be feared and avoided.

Of course, whatever support is made available and however equal a society families live in, some children will require protection by separation from their birth parents and placement in an alternative family. When this is known to be necessary, the least delay possible is almost always advantageous. But the case that is being advanced goes well beyond that proposition. The importance of the extremely difficult decisions that have to be made about individual children and the equally difficult decisions that have to be made about child welfare policy requires a very high standard of evidence and argument. The many systemic mistakes of the past should caution us against a 'rush to judgement'. As the Gillard apology put it 'the consequences ... continue to resonate through many, many lives' (2013, paragraph 12).

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Bywaters, P. Cumulative Jeopardy? A response to Brown and Ward.

### Highlights

- Removing more children to out-of-home care is a political priority in England.
- A longitudinal study of infants by Brown and Ward is influential in this argument.
- The conclusions drawn from the study are insufficiently supported by the evidence.
- Methodological, empirical, conceptual and ethical concerns are discussed.
- Caution should be exercised in building extensive policy on this evidence.